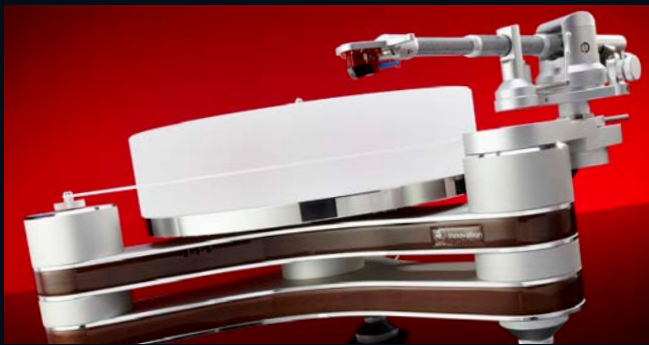


Hi-Fi Choice

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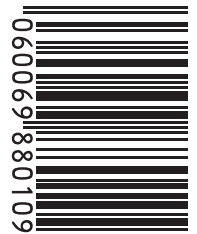


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Devialet

D-PREMIER

Flying the 21st century flag with this superb pre/power with built-in DAC

Price £10,000 **Contact** Absolute Sounds ◉ 020 8971 3909 ◉ www.deviallet.com

For the average sane person, high-end hi-fi is a high maintenance affair. It might sound good, but it's complex; needs careful installation and set up; and requires expert fine-tuning for best results.

Consequently, those who buy praise the high end tend to be seasoned enthusiasts who've spent half their lives acquiring the knowledge. But, what if you're not a hi-fi buff – just a music lover with bags of dosh? You appreciate great sound and want to hear it reproduced with the minimum of fuss. What's out there that fits the bill? Try the D-Premier for size...

The D-Premier is a combined stereo pre/power amp and digital to analogue converter. To use it you need a digital/analogue source component (LP, CD, SACD, or hard drive) and a pair of loudspeakers. The unit has a single on/off button, so things like volume and input selection are altered by wireless remote control.

The whole package is housed in a polished alloy case that looks simple and beautiful. Indeed, on looks alone, you might not take it seriously – given its small size, you'd never believe it was so powerful. But the combination of a Class A voltage-amp, with Class D supplying current, results in around 240 watts per channel.

The power amp output has extremely low source-impedance (around 0.005 ohms from 20Hz to 20kHz), plus the ability to keep doubling its current output into low impedance loads. Frequency response (via the high-res digital inputs) goes from 0.1Hz to 90kHz, and distortion is a super-low 0.005 per cent.

The digital side is also outstandingly good, and capable of high-resolution conversion using 24-bit 96kHz and 24-bit 192kHz source material, along with regular Red Book CD. Overall, the D/A converters deliver class-leading results, with almost non-existent levels of jitter. All good, but, the most impressive thing is the sound...

SOUND QUALITY

It's very open and neutral, with outstanding clarity and crisp transient attack. Warm-up time is virtually zero, and from the first few notes you know that this is a product totally out of the ordinary. There's a purity, cleanness, and crisp immediacy rarely encountered – at any price.

Tonally, the D-Premier sounds very natural, and faithfully reflects whatever you feed it with. It's not really 'warm' or 'cool' – it can be either, neither or both! Listening to it, you sense that all the little colorations that lead to slight tonal shifts, and add noise and grunge, have been eliminated.

Predictably, it's terrific when reproducing high-resolution recordings. But, perhaps surprisingly, it also sounds excellent on 'lesser' material – it doesn't add grunge or nasties of its own. Being intrinsically pure and clean, it reveals qualities often obscured by lesser equipment.

Rachmaninov's third piano concerto played by Horowitz on RCA – the 1978 live performance celebrating the pianist's Golden Jubilee – proves spellbinding. The power amp clarified the individual strands of this notoriously grainy, muddy and congested recording, bringing the whole performance to life. The sound on this disc – usually so dense and opaque – has a

crystalline clarity that was surprising and remarkable, allowing us to savour Horowitz' amazingly dextrous fingerwork. Whatever the music demands – passion, inwardness, bravura, intimacy – the D-Premier delivers, sounding true, whole and complete.

We sampled a few other Horowitz/RCA performance from the 1950s. In audiophile terms, none are especially well-recorded, yet the piano sound is uncannily clean and crisp, faithfully recreating those subtle Horowitzian tone colours and razor-sharp dynamics, despite 'limitations' in the original source material. High praise indeed.

The D-Premier's bass quality is phenomenal – not just in terms of power, tightness, and attack, but for sheer depth. Used with speakers able to reproduce down to the low 20Hz region, you'll hear all sorts of low frequency detail other amplifiers/DACs mask. At the top end, the sound is wonderfully clean and free from congestion/harshness.

"From the first note, you know this is going to be something extraordinary"

It's remarkable that a product so un-high end in terms of looks, size, and weight can take on the best that the high-end has to offer, and more than hold its own. It sounds big, but it's all muscle rather than fat, and produces a very honest, truthful sound that commands attention and respect.

While we love the remote with its big analogue volume control, it would have been nice to have an indication of volume levels and input selection visible from the remote itself. If you can't see the amp itself, you don't quite know where you are. Being wireless, the remote works anywhere in the room and even outside it.

The D-Premier might not conform to the usual high-end stereotypes, but the sound makes it bona-fide high end. It's small, light, runs cool, and doesn't look like a piece of lab equipment from the 1960s. But, make no mistake, it's a wolf in sheep's clothing; a high-performance Formula One car masquerading as a Mini.

There are many reasons for wanting to own this great bit of hi-fi kit – it's stylish, elegant, supremely practical and simple to use. Even hard-bitten high-enders should try it. But don't listen unless you're willing to have many of your most cherished illusions shattered. With the Devialet D-Premier, the high end enters the 21st century. It's about time too... ■

Jimmy Hughes

